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Politigram:  
Leftist Political Instagram and Horizons of Knowledge

By

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## Abstract

This paper considers how the structure of Instagram and social norms on the app constitute a landscape that restricts and amplifies the flows of certain informational forms — what I term the knowledge landscape. Instagram’s knowledge landscape selects for certain ideas to proliferate across the app, leading to particular signifiatory and affective encounters with ideas and unique sedimentations of knowledge. To understand how the knowledge landscape influences encounters with political ideas, I analyze follower network and digital engagement data across 127 accounts and several hundred posts from “Politigram”, a loose space of activist, advocacy, meme, and ‘shitpost’ accounts engaging in left-leaning politics. Using interviews with six users and five content creators on Politigram, I explore how the space is understood by those who use it, what motivates users to engage with various content, and what engagement habits emerge. These factors reveal the topologies of the knowledge landscape that influence the flows of information through the space. Finally, I consider the processes by which the knowledge landscape reconfigures information through memeification. This paper critiques the notion that Instagram, or any media platform, can serve as a neutral ground for advocacy and education to new audiences. The possibilities of engagement are restricted by the knowledge landscape, eliciting certain behaviors from users, constricting the range of idea encounters, and producing knowledge that is qualitatively distinct from that which is encountered elsewhere.

## Introduction: The Knowledge Landscape

Knowledge is a relational web of ideas inescapably configured by its instantiation. Information does not slide along frictionless surfaces of perfect communication but is configured by its form, following messy lines of transmission and sedimentation. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari speak of a book not only through signification and meaning, but consider the book in itself, what it functions with, what intensities it transmits (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). So too must other forms of (social) media be investigated; not neatly ferrying ideas across space but activating thought through signification and affective linking. In this paper, I argue that Instagram, like all media and all environments of interaction, sets up a landscape of possibilities through which actors move. There are certain kinds of ideas that can exist across this landscape, constrained by its topologies. These topological features are the organization of the site, modes of interaction, possibilities of socialization, and social and algorithmic nudges. The organization of information on the app elicits certain kinds of interaction and is hostile to others. It sets up a particular encounter with information and stakes out a set of possibilities for building knowledge. This conceptualization dispenses with the idea that Instagram is or ever could be a neutral platform, a transparent window through which knowledge can be shared. Rather, the knowledge landscape destroys, winnows, transforms, and selects conceptual forms that resonate with it. Content creators and users on Instagram employ varied strategies of communication to achieve particular goals, but these strategies are conscribed within the limitations of the knowledge landscape and will flourish or languish according to those logics. Each form of media stakes out a landscape of knowledge possibilities immanent to both its own organizational structure and the social relationships those structures give rise to.

When small-scale social ideas flow into, and are configured by, the knowledge landscape of Instagram, the stakes are low. But what happens when political and philosophical ideas flow into this new landscape? How are these ideas reconfigured by the possibility space of Instagram? To explore these questions, I examine how users interact with political content on Instagram, map the variety of content across accounts, and examine the motivations of both users and content creators for engaging with politics on Instagram. This will help to reveal the particularities of the landscape of knowledge possibilities. This framework allows for examination of idea proliferation across the space, which concepts struggle, and why. Building this picture will help lead to a better understanding of online politics and what is at stake when political ideas encounter social media landscapes.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Instagram constitutes a social field in which interaction takes place. Interaction in digital spaces is limited, conscribed within the possibilities of the platform and the activities the platform elicits. To consider the social field and its interactions, it is helpful to think with the habitus. A concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu, the habitus is a set of tastes and dispositions that is reproduced in social spaces and perpetuates culture (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu thought of a habitus as perpetuating power in a social field — a set of configured features that reaches across social spaces and establishes how tastes and dispositions hang together in class structures. “[D]ifferent conditions of existence produce different habitus,” accumulating and sedimenting into “schemes of perception and appreciation necessary in order to identify, interpret and evaluate” pertinent features of the social world (Bourdieu 1984, 170). The habitus is foundational: the lens through which the situational encounter is interpreted, divided, and made

comprehensible, “not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure” built up through interactions (Bourdieu 1984, 170).

But the realms of the digital are less entrenched and more fragmentary than the class dynamics Bourdieu sought to describe. The relative anonymity of digital spaces (or their disconnect from users’ non-digital lives) and the heterogeneous modes of digital engagement mean that, at least presently, there are no entrenched orthodox habitus that dominate. Digital spaces are not open in the way the non-digital world is; the range of movement and possible activities is more limited. The subject is not a free agent on an open plane who is only impeded by a social labyrinth of norms and divisions. It is helpful to think of how the subject is situationally configured in the junctions between digital and non-digital spaces.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari develop a conception of a decentered and variational subject. For them, the subject is peripheral to a machinic center, “with no fixed identity, forever decentered, *defined* by the states through which it passes” (emphasis in original, Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 20).<sup>1</sup> The subject, the Instagram user, is configured and reconfigured as they move through different digital spaces. To more fully grasp the dynamics of digital social spaces, a distillation of Bourdieu and Deleuze is needed. Social spaces develop norms and individuals stake out positions within these fields, but the fields are fragmented. Cultural capital accumulated in certain digital spaces is not universal but is valued within a particular space. The subject is not singular and centered, but peripheral to the digital social machine which acts upon them. In this paper, I view the habitus not with respect to a universal hierarchical social code, as with class, but with respect to a mosaic of nested social fields. Internet users build a particular habitus but do not accrue universal cultural capital that can be exchanged anywhere. A particular

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuzian machines are any processes that cut and redirect flows. For more on Deleuzian machines, flows, and subjects, see *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 1–50)

habitus may resonate with the social norms of certain spaces. Within these spaces, positions are taken, cultural capital is accumulated, the uninitiated are excluded, and power is staked out. But across the fractal spaces there is no hierarchy that is universally understood and subjects are able to remain mobile across the set of spaces.

Social activity on Instagram is fundamentally enmeshed with the structuring of the app. Instagram is not only its structures, nor only the socialization that takes place. Activity sits on a topology that nudges activity, directs and amplifies some flows, and disrupts and resists others. Amplification and resistance is a product of the structures that are established by the interplay of social norms and platform design. These structures are topologies on a landscape that limit the possibilities of certain flows of ideas, ideas which accumulate with the subject and hang together as knowledge. This is crucially why Instagram is not a smooth surface for the transmission of concepts but instead configures particular kinds of encounters with ideas. Deleuze and Guattari, in *What is Philosophy?*, consider a concept “the point of coincidence, condensation, or accumulation of its own components” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 20). The process of accumulation and what is accumulated is tantamount to the concept, sedimented over encounters.

Media makes use of many modalities; Instagram is home to text, image, video, and social situations that the user encounters. It is useful here to think with affect, a Deleuzian concept of pre-emotional intensity. Brian Massumi addresses a social life of two registers; the register of symbolic mediation of discourse and the affective register of embodied intensities (Massumi 2002). Though the digital makes minimal impact on the body, ideas are encountered on Instagram that are not reducible to the symbolic and linguistic. Images activate thought through affective intensities. William Mazzarella (2009) discusses the implications of thinking with affect for social fields, writing that affect-intensive factors which exceed the instrumental should not be

considered auxiliary. Affective activation in the subject is not contingent only on the subject or the object, but is the confluence of social fields coming to bear on an encounter. Affect is not *subjective* nor *objective*, but located in the intermediary space of sprawling relations. The habitus operates affectively, both in its sedimentation (a habitus is not learned through instruction but participation) and its active social structuring. Flows on Instagram too are affective. Thinking with affect problematizes the presumed or desired communicational certainty of instrumental political discussions. Through the images, videos, and social norms of Instagram, the role of affect in activating thought and building knowledge cannot be ignored.

Through these theoretical framings, Instagram can be understood as a mosaic social field, fragmentary yet interconnected. The design of the platform and the social norms influence user activity, giving rise to topologies on a landscape of possibilities which restrict, block, or amplify flows of ideas and interactions. Discursive flows on Instagram are crucially affective, and because encounters are so substantially affectively mediated, the schemas of knowledge users build are themselves radically affective. Understanding the topology through Instagram's structures and norms helps to reveal which kinds of knowledge succeed and proliferate across the space, which stagnate, and how these possibilities influence political activity on the platform. Framing analysis through the knowledge landscape allows us to look across platforms and not just catalogue patterns of behavior but examine how those patterns are configured and what potentials these spaces hold.

### **What is Instagram?**

Before we can examine the social fields of Instagram, it is important to consider the platform itself and its organization. Instagram is one of the largest social media sites on the internet, with over 1.3 billion monthly active users globally as of 2021, over 130 million of



whom are from the United States (Kemp 2021). This user base far outpaces other comparable social media sites popular in the West such as TikTok, Twitter, and Reddit, and is only bested by Facebook. Instagram is, at its core, a photo sharing app, where each post is a photo or video with optional captions and tags. There is no option to make a purely textual post; the format is unyieldingly restrictive in that the primary, most visible part of a post must be visual. When a user makes a post, it is broadcasted onto the feeds of other users who follow them. The feed is an endless scroll of content from followed pages and algorithmic suggestions. Posts are catalogued on respective users' profile pages where they remain indefinitely, allowing users to curate a self image conveyed across time, in the feed, and localized within the profile page (Mahoney et al. 2016). The feed and the profile constitute the foundation of interaction on Instagram. Also crucial to understanding interactions are stories. Stories are time-limited posts that disappear after 24 hours and are not logged for later viewing. This allows stories to operate further away from pressures of profile curation to which posts are subject. Their transience allows them to be more timely and operate at lower stakes; they do not accumulate into a profile-image that can be scrutinized later. This post-story dichotomy allows for a range of kinds of relationships that users have with content broadcasting and social presentation.

Instagram also importantly has a built-in chat feature. Chats allow users to privately communicate, sending messages or sharing posts. In chatting, there is no profile curation beyond what would be seen in any other private interaction. Interactions on Instagram are then located in several distinct locations on the app, with each having its own particular implications for content sharing and social interaction. Recognizing these different spaces and their implications for socialization is necessary to understand how users utilize different features of Instagram for particular social purposes, and how these implications configure and limit interaction.

One of the most important facets of Instagram is its status as a smartphone application. Instagram is designed with the intention of being an app, not a web-based social media site. Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit began as web-based sites that only later got their own smartphone apps. Instagram, on the other hand, was from its inception a smartphone application. The limited functionality of the Instagram web interface does not allow a user to even post from the browser site.<sup>2</sup> The layout is instead optimized for smartphone use. Posts on feeds and stories are shown one at a time, scrolled through with the flick of a finger. Posts may be made in groups or sequences, but still only one image can be seen at a time. This design encourages the production of posts that are able to stand alone and achieve their goal within the confines of that singular image. Moving between posts is quick and tactile. Each post becomes potentially fleeting and must compete in the marketplace of attention against practically endless alternative content. This encourages posts that catch the eye and are quickly recognized as notable or worthwhile. Otherwise, the post is scrolled past without digital engagement — shares, saves, comments, and likes, some of the few metrics of success content creators can view. These encouragements, nudges, given by the design of the app, constitute some of the most foundational topologies of the Instagram knowledge landscape. They make certain kinds of interactions possible and restrict other potentials. With the app's organizational structure outlined, social norms, interactions, and fields that supervene upon them can be considered.

### **Politics, Instagram, and Politigram**

To examine the dynamics between political ideas and Instagram's landscape of knowledge possibilities, I focus on leftist discourse spaces. Though it is often right-wing spaces

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<sup>2</sup> Instagram has a much lower incidence of desktop use compared to Twitter or Facebook (Richter 2014).

of online radicalization that garner attention (Grinberg et al. 2019, Ribiero et al. 2020, Scrivens 2020), left-leaning voices make up a substantial proportion of online political discourse. On Twitter and Reddit, left-leaning voices are accepted as the default, leaving right-leaning voices to carve out their own exclusive spaces (such as r/Conservative or r/The\_Donald on Reddit, and independent sites Gab and Parlor). But the online Left deserves critical attention. Conversations around social justice, racial justice, and left-leaning political action are influenced by online discourse both within leftist spaces and at their peripheries. Examining the delineation of groups, styles of content, patterns of interaction, and motivation for engagement in political topics helps to build a more robust understanding of how left-leaning politics operate online and how structures of the knowledge landscapes shape the possibilities of idea exchange in those spaces.

‘Politics’ and ‘Leftism’ are notoriously indefinite signifiers, their boundaries always contested and in flux. I do not aim to measure actors on Instagram against a unitary definition of ‘leftist politics’ or map out how the terms are used in online spaces. Rather, leftist spaces on Instagram are better understood as a Bourdieusian field of cultural production. There are central common ideas and peripheries; boundaries of discourse flux organically rather than by consensus of a strictly bounded group. Ingroups and outgroups — who qualifies as a “real leftist” — are policed and designated according to local norms leading to a heterogeneous space of alliances and exclusions. The struggle for legitimacy between contesting actors and groups is what characterizes the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993). A typical Bourdieusian field has taste-makers at the center defining established norms. Other actors align themselves with these norms or go against them, carving out subsets of the field with their own tastemakers or moving to unseat the establishment. The space of online leftist politics is too new and too small to have developed substantially entrenched power structures. Newness proliferates at a dizzying clip that

renders established modes outdated on much shorter timescales than in non-digital spaces.

Political taste-makers on Instagram are often larger accounts that set the agenda for popular topics of discussion; YouTube content creators, streamers, or podcasts may do the same, and interviews with content creators and users show cross-platform taste-makers to be influential. Moreover, an analytical orientation away from seeking a particular bounding definition of the space of leftist discourse and towards examining the multiple contestations of what does or does not belong in the space offers a more robust picture of the social interactions that take place. Some degree of artificial limitation is, however, required for this project. Following every potentially ‘political’ topic can quickly explode out into a space too large to be meaningfully investigated. While the solution cannot be to study the entire online Left at once, analysis should bear in mind that Instagram users do not live solely on the app or in particular corners of it.

Accounts do not always clearly cleave into Left or Right, political or apolitical. For some, non-partisan, particularist ideological affinity (“meme ideologies”) is a defining feature of their online political interaction. There are also accounts focused on feminism, women’s issues, mental health, LGBTQ issues, and cultural and racial groups. Such pages may share substantial overlap in follower bases with more overtly political accounts, but ‘political’ remains a problematic classifier; when, for instance, does a women’s positivity page move from affirmations and self-help and into the realm of the political? Under the perspective of identity politics, any personal facet can be considered political, and again, too wide of a framing can make analysis unwieldy within the limitations of this project. As such, I take a more restricted view of what constitutes leftist politics, delineating ‘politics’ with respect to governance and the American Left. It includes issues of government, policy, political theory, political philosophy,

electoralism, political rights, environmental politics, gender politics, etc., as well as modes of governance including voting, protesting, and revolutionary activities.

With a framing of ‘leftist politics’ established, the landscape of Politigram can be examined. Politigram is a contested label with particular connotations within the space of Instagram leftist discourse. For some, such as Joshua Citarella, an artist, writer, and participant on Politigram, the term is narrowly defined.<sup>3</sup> For Citarella and others, Politigram was and is “a community of twelve to seventeen year old mostly white, mostly male participants that would treat politics as something similar to an RPG [role-playing game] on social media” (Personal communication, Dec. 12, 2020).<sup>4</sup> This view of Politigram emphasizes performativity and dedication to particularist “meme ideologies” — anarcho-primitivism or neo-monarchic mercantilism, for instance. This definition of Politigram is defined by radicalism; it is not an expressly leftist phenomenon and is resistant to Left versus Right reduction. It is made up of innumerable accounts with relatively small follower bases, ranging from a few dozen to a few hundred, with a handful reaching several thousand followers. But because followers are often interconnected with other political spaces on Instagram, this paper broadens the lens of analysis away from a particularized, restricted Politigram of “meme ideology” accounts and considers a wider set of goals and communication strategies. For the purposes of this paper, “Politigram” refers to the broad space of leftist discourse on Instagram, accounting for the political topics discussed above.

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<sup>3</sup> Citarella was an interview participant in this research. He expressly requested that he not remain anonymous and that his real name be associated with any responses. I have kept all other interview participants anonymous.

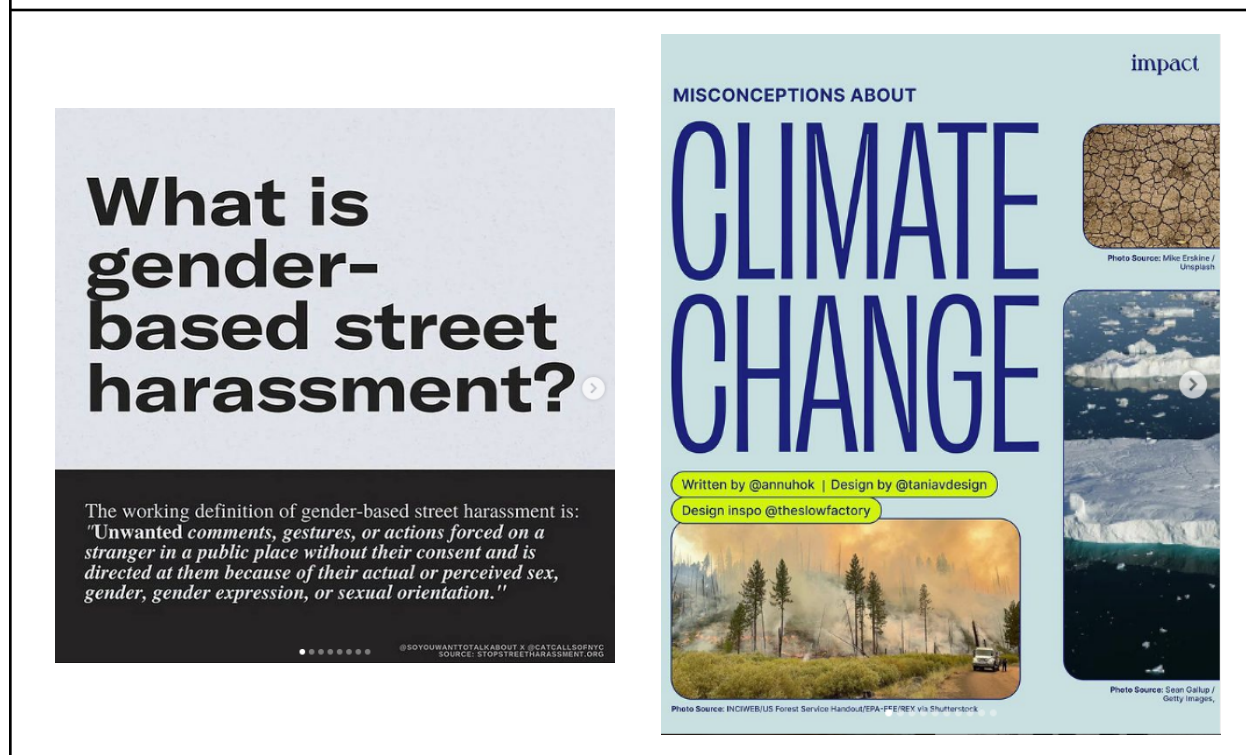
<sup>4</sup> Data on the age demographics of Politigram is difficult to establish with certainty, compounded by the ability of younger users to lie about their age. Scant available data seems to indicate that followers of Politigram skew younger than the average distribution of Instagram users, peaking in the 18-24 year old range. For more, see Appendix A. Similarly scant data from the humorous wing of Politigram indicates that it is a male-dominated space. For more, see Appendix B. These samples may not be representative of the entire diversity of accounts.

The term “Politigram” can carry particular connotations. No content creators I spoke with personally identified as being part of Politigram per se, though most were familiar with the term. For them, Politigram suggested a network of accounts with certain habits, a group they felt they did not belong to. As such, Politigram itself is a label whose meaning is understood variably by actors in the leftist spaces of Instagram, and can often be a categorization imposed from the outside rather than internally deployed. Nevertheless, I will retain the term “Politigram” to broadly describe the space but note that I do not use the term to pick out a particular community. Citarella’s narrow definition may be useful in considering activity of content creators, but it constricts the scope of analysis too greatly so as to miss important interactions Instagram users and followers of these accounts have with greater varieties of left-leaning political content.

### **Styles of Content**

Political content on Instagram can broadly be divided into two strategies of communication: earnest and humorous. Earnest posts typically aim for direct, plain, or serious strategies of information exchange rather than making use of humor, and are more education-oriented. Earnest and humorous posts often make heavy use of affect, separating them from most other news or political literature and foundationally influencing the encounter with the information. Of the earnest post types, the infographic is among the most prominent and characteristic styles of political posting on Instagram. An infographic on Instagram is an image or series of images meant to briefly convey an idea or educate a user, primarily through text. They are among the more overtly communication-focused and educational types of posting on Politigram and function similarly to a tweet thread on Twitter. Infographics are typically relatively lengthy and dense, containing information on a topic, history, examples, calls to action,

Figure 1. Examples of infographics.



or resources for a user to get involved in the given cause (see figure 1). Activist and news posts are also prominent among earnest posting strategies. An activist-oriented post may contain scenes from a march or images of protestors or volunteers, and are particularly common in relation to contemporary protest movements. Some accounts host dedicated activist content associated with particular organizations, causes, or localities. Activist-oriented accounts also may post flyers and notices of particular actions, making use of Instagram's story feature to produce timely updates or amplify posts.

Leftist art and propaganda represent another common posting style. Propaganda is the presentation of an idea as part of an ideology with the intent of dissemination and persuasion, primarily by affective appeal. Propaganda typically carries a sinister connotation. I do not mean to make a value judgement on posts I describe as propaganda, nor do I mean to imply that

Figure 2. Examples of propagandistic posts.

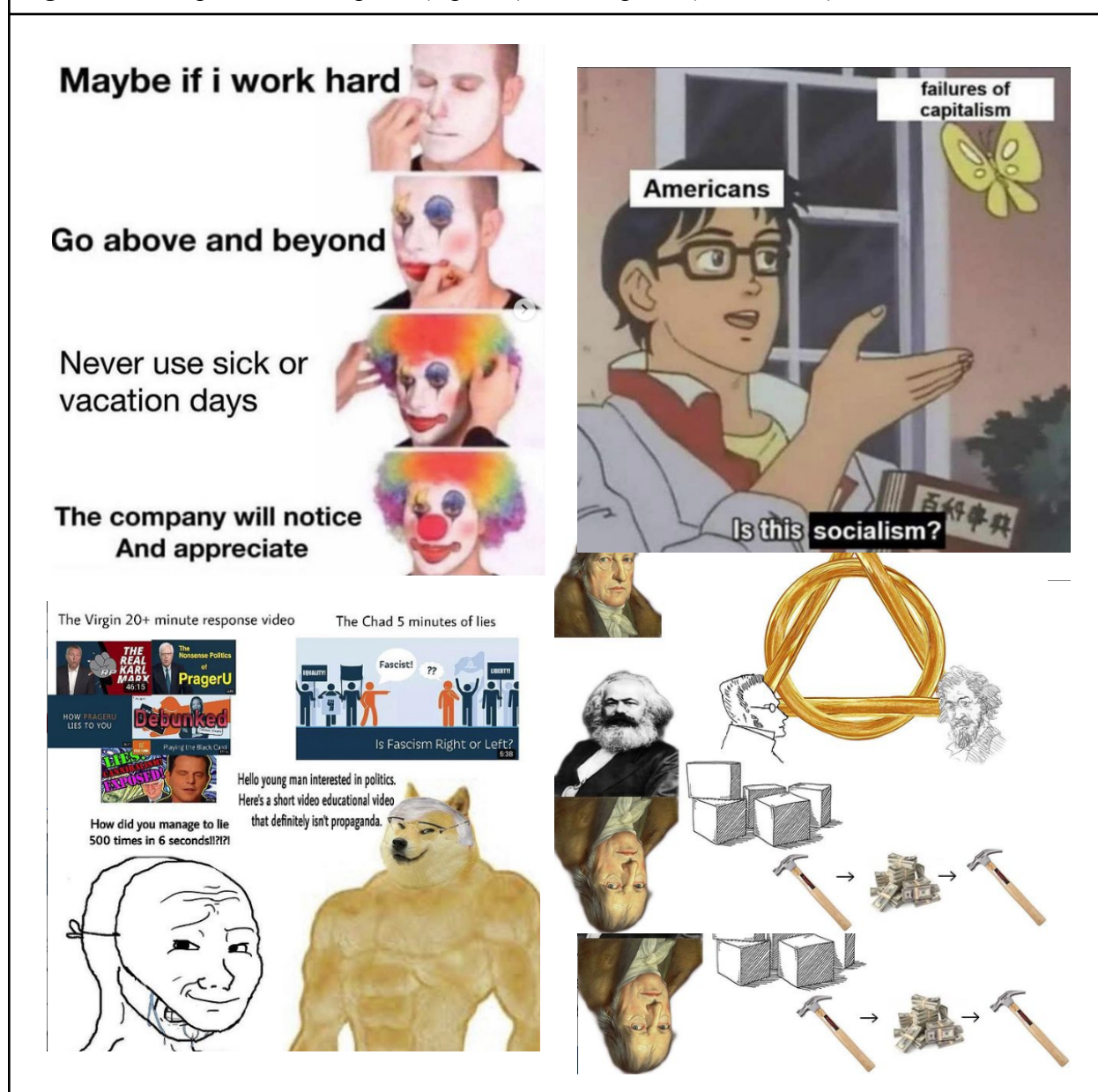


propagandistic posts have any connection to state actors; the classification “propaganda” refers only to the style of information conveyance (see figure 2).

Posts that employ humor as a rhetorical strategy are widespread and varied across Politigram. Humorous posts can be broadly divided into memes and “shitposts.” The difference between memes and shitposts must be discerned through qualitative distinctions that can be recognized only once a user is substantially familiar with relevant social and cultural norms. Meme posts typically employ recognizable formats, are clearer or more straightforward in their messaging than shitposts, and are accessible to a wider audience. Meme posts can be understood without intensive familiarity with particular relevant norms. Conversely, shitposts often make use of higher degrees of irony and require a deeper grasp of particular norms and in-jokes of a community to decipher. They are less accessible to a general audience and can function as a form of gatekeeping, working to ensure only certain users participate in the space. A Politigram shitpost may not convey a direct message within the bounds of the singular post itself, but instead serve as an instantiation of a habitus, incorporating humor and political dispositions that



Figure 3. Examples of meme posts (top row) and shitposts (bottom row).



can only be assessed in the context of other posts from a particular user or group (see figure 3).

The distinction between these two categories is drawn along lines of intentionality and accessibility; it is a qualitative judgement, and designations may vary between users, but page connectivity data suggests there is a meaningful distinction between the two.

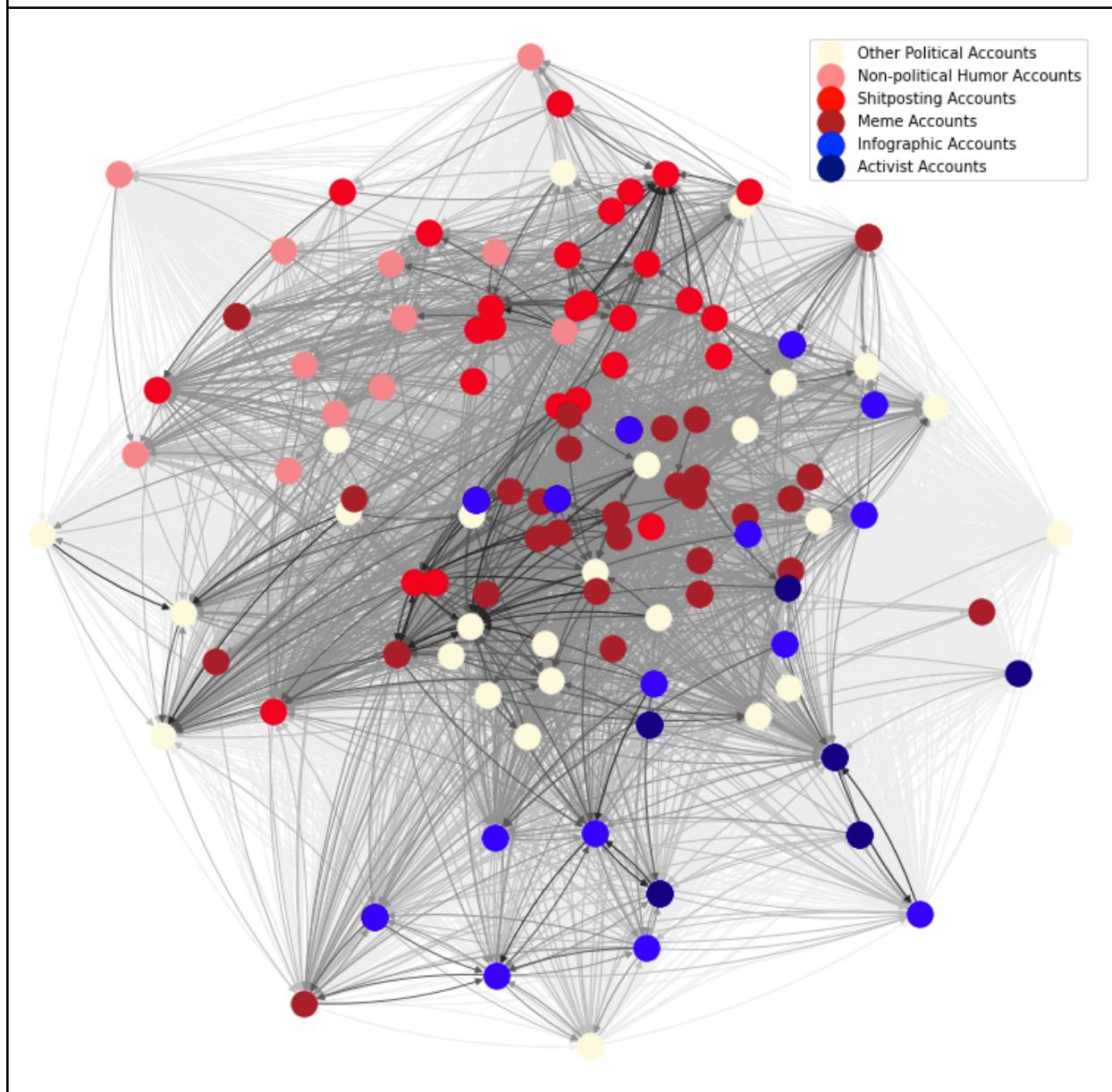
Another important posting format on Politigram to note is reposts of tweets, where a tweet from Twitter will be screen-captured and posted to Instagram. Cross-platform posting is common on many social media sites. Tweet reposting is notable because it makes up a substantial proportion of posts on certain accounts and garners a particular kind of engagement because of how it fits into the knowledge landscape of Instagram, which I detail below.

### **The Landscape of Politigram**

For this project, I examined 127 public Politigram accounts, ranging in size from 4000 followers to over 4 million. I included accounts of activist organizations, political Youtubers and streamers, left-leaning publishers and news accounts, infographic-oriented accounts, and a host of meme and shitpost accounts. Smaller politically oriented accounts were too numerous to include in this analysis due to project limitations. The accounts examined represent only a subset of all Politigram accounts, but I am confident that all major types of relevant accounts are represented. I began with several accounts that I learned of from Politigram users I interviewed and my own prior familiarity, and snowball sampled by looking through Instagram recommendations, shared posts, and follower lists. I repeated this process until I no longer found new accounts that fit the criteria of inclusion. While it is possible that some accounts were disconnected enough from accounts found with this method, it is unlikely that enough major accounts were missed to be impactful to this paper's analysis.

Once accounts were selected, I used an Instagram API to collect follower data for each account, collecting up to 20,000 follower names per account. I used this data to find mutual followers for account pairs, and used the mutual follower count and the proportion of followers collected to estimate the total proportion of one account's followers also following any other

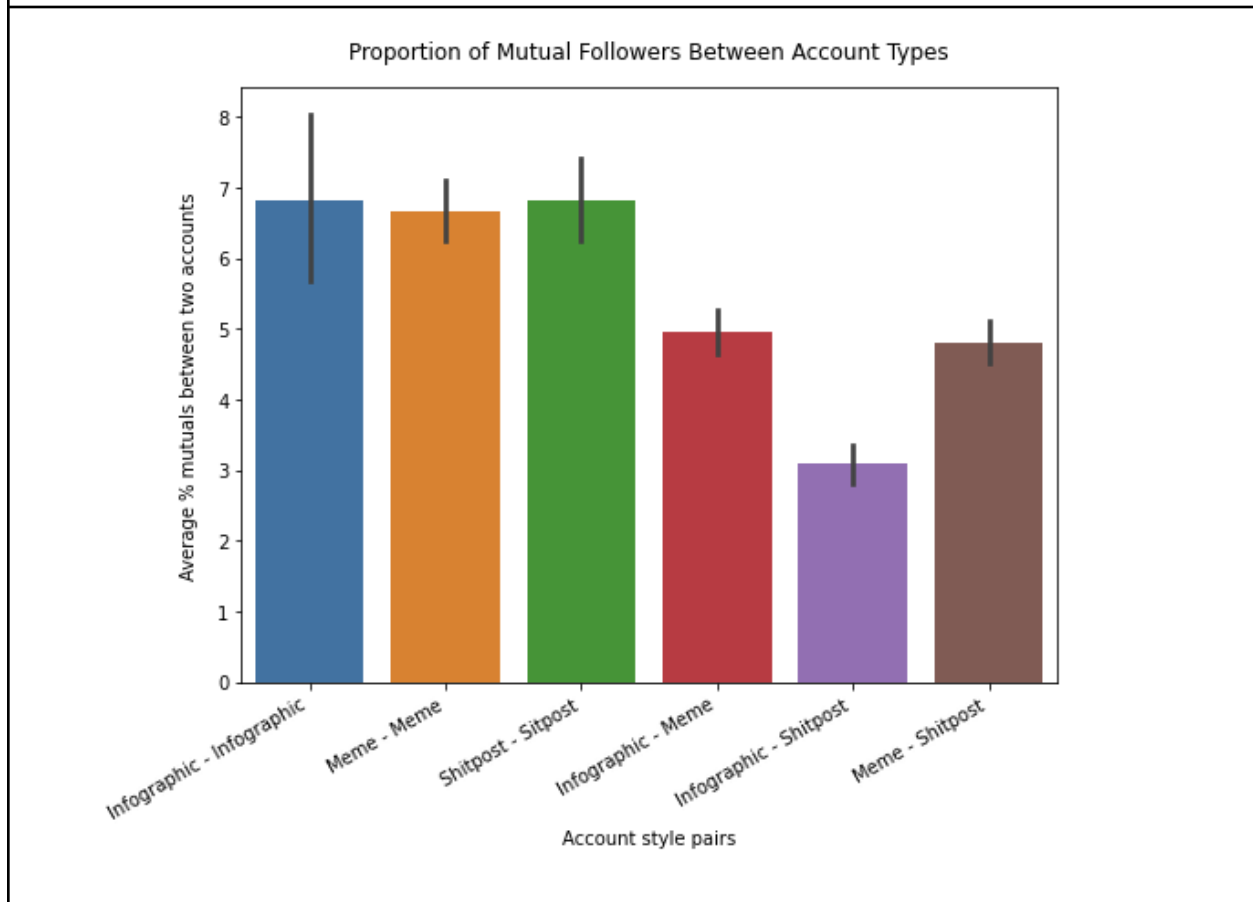
*Figure 4.* Network map of Politigram interconnectivity. Darker arrows indicate stronger directional interconnectivity.



account in my subset of Politigram accounts. This proportion represents the interconnectedness of account pairs as a function of mutual followers. I then use this data as an network edge list and represent the interconnectivity of the space using the NetworkX python library.

The map of interconnectivity (Figure 4) reveals that accounts are not strictly segregated by type but do display patterns of clustering. Clustering of different account styles away from

Figure 5. Mean interconnectivity between account types.



each other suggests that different users are variably receptive to certain styles of political content over others, a finding corroborated by interviews with Instagram users. Figure 5 shows average interconnectivity between posting styles. Mean intra-style account interconnectivity for three of the most prominent categories, infographics, memes, and shitposts, was roughly 7%. Using the method described by Efron and Tibshirani (1993), I created bootstrap samples from the population of proportions of mutual followers between account style pairs to obtain a sample mean distribution for each. I then calculated a 95% confidence interval for the mean sample distributions to test the null hypothesis  $H_0$  that the mean proportion of mutual followers was equal. The interconnectivity (mean proportion of mutuals) between infographic and shitpost

accounts was lower than between infographic and meme accounts ( $p < 0.05$ ). Interconnectivity *between* styles was lower than *within* style groups ( $p < 0.05$ ). These results are reflected in the map of interconnectivity above, where infographic accounts have substantially more interconnectivity with meme accounts than they do with shitpost accounts. Notably, meme-posting accounts and shitposting accounts are significantly less proportionally interconnected than within respective style groups ( $p < 0.05$ ). This is evidence for a qualitative difference between memes and shitposts that is recognized by Instagram users and reflected in their following habits. The mean proportion of mutuals between meme-posting and infographic-posting accounts was not significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ ). Moreover, a Mann-Whitney U test, which tests that two samples are drawn from the same distribution, did not find a significant difference between the interconnectivity of meme and infographic accounts and meme and shitpost accounts ( $p > 0.05$ ). For more, see Appendix C.

This finding suggests two major points. Firstly, meme accounts occupy an intermittent space between earnest, educational infographic accounts and obscure, humorous political shitposting accounts. Followers of meme accounts as a group tend to be more variable in their content consumption, supporting the hypothesis that meme accounts require a less particularized habitus than shitpost accounts. Secondly, followers of shitpost accounts as a group tend to be more insular in their interaction with pages for different styles. They proportionally follow fewer accounts of varied style and are followed less frequently by followers of non-shitpost accounts, suggesting the more particularized habitus functions as an exclusionary mechanism. This quantitative observation, along with the trend in shitpost content of employing more developed irony and obscure in-jokes, portrays the shitposting wing of Politigram as an insular space disinterested in the kinds of political activity found on more accessible pages. Mapping out this

division is important for understanding how ideas can flow across the space of leftist Instagram. These stylistic divisions contextualize user activity and the kinds of ideas that circulate. The network of Politigram is an interconnected mosaic, fractured along stylistic and topical lines. There are not strict delineations of groups, but nevertheless degrees of segmentation occur and a differentiated topology of interaction arises. This differentiation is evidence of a diverse follower base with different goals of interaction in the space, and distinct patterns of tastes and dispositions that emerge and demarcate spaces of knowledge.

### **Post Variety and Performance**

Politigram accounts may incorporate several formats rather than adhere to one style or topic. This allows for a natural control sample that can help reveal how users tend to engage with varied kinds of posts. Engagement on Instagram is gauged principally through sharing, saving, commenting, and liking. Data on saves and shares is not publicly available, so this analysis focuses on comment and like data. To perform this analysis, I recorded numbers of likes and comments on 100 posts from several select accounts along with prominent themes in each post. This allows for the identification of trends in post popularity.

One trend is the high performance of reposted tweets relative to other formats. This trend held for both earnest and humorous accounts, though meme accounts tended to post screen-captured tweets more frequently than shitpost accounts. This suggests that the format of a tweet is a form well suited to the informational selective pressures of Instagram's knowledge landscape. It is consumable, recognizable, and shareable.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, videos on Politigram tend to perform poorly on similar metrics (Kemp 2021). Videos tend to garner markedly fewer likes

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<sup>5</sup> Tweets may also perform better with these engagement metrics on average because they are selected from Twitter where they have already performed successfully

than image and text posts. Videos perform poorly on Politigram because they are structurally incongruent with prevailing selective pressures of the knowledge environment. They require longer attention duration, while Instagram elicits a form of engagement characterized by rapid flitting to new content and video posts are resistant to this kind of engagement. Thus videos, particularly longer videos concerning political topics, tend to suffer on engagement metrics.

Infographics, though they are a recognized and widely shared post format on Instagram, often perform worse than other shorter-form posts on the same page. A full infographic often contains many slides that a user must swipe through. The knowledge landscape of Instagram selects for quickly consumable content, and infographics are incongruous with this ethos. Though they see frequent sharing by users who may see them as educational tools and a means of straightforward information dissemination, they tend to receive fewer likes than shorter-format posts (see Appendix D). Infographics may remain resilient on Instagram because they are seen and treated as educational resources and a part of activist action by users who share them. They are a recognizable format, straightforward to craft, and fit within the structures of an Instagram post. Nevertheless, their average poor performance on engagement metrics of likes and comments indicates a tension with the selective pressures from user interaction.

Patterns of user interaction with different forms of content on Politigram help to reveal the topology of the knowledge landscape. Using the engagement metrics of likes and comments as lenses of analysis for interaction, certain kinds of posts tend to clearly outperform, or elicit a greater degree of engagement, than others. Within particular pages, post style tends to be a greater predictor of engagement than topic. Styles that are short, recognizable, and punchy, such as Tweet reposts, tend to perform best while longer-form image, video, or textual content tends to perform marginally worse on engagement metrics. This tendency has implications for the

possibilities of idea circulation on Politigram. Ideas that require longer formats, containing potentially more detailed or nuanced information, suffer in this landscape. Ideas that are attention-grabbing and can be understood or recognized quickly are encouraged and have greater chances of proliferating across the space.

### **Content Creator Strategy and Intentions**

Accounts on Politigram, broadly, are engaged in political advocacy. Intentions exist along a range for humorous and earnest accounts as audience and rhetorical strategies vary. It is important to not presume that every account has clear, stable, purposeful intentions. But even while intention can evolve as an account admin's own views and relation to their digital milieu develop, there is a limited set of strategies that accounts engage in.

Presence		
Earnest	Instrumentalized	Outgroup-oriented
		Ingroup-oriented
	Personal	Political
Humorous	Instrumentalized	Outgroup-oriented
		Ingroup-oriented
	Personal	Social

There are political accounts for which Instagram is not the main site of their political engagement. For established organizations or political celebrity figures, such as YouTubers or podcasters, an Instagram account can function as a place-holder — presence for the sake of having a presence. The Gravel Institute, a left-wing media and advocacy organization, uses their



Instagram page entirely to repost images of tweets from their Twitter account. Leftist Twitch streamer Hasan Piker uses his Instagram page for predominantly non-political personal photos. For these accounts, presence on the platform is not expressly instrumentalized to a political end much beyond brand recognition.

For earnest account types, there are three modes of interaction made possible by Instagram's knowledge landscape. Accounts may be instrumentalized or personal, referring to their degree of political intentionality. Instrumentalized accounts exist on Politigram for the purpose of enacting a political project. Earnest instrumentalized (E.I.) accounts can be understood in terms of more traditional political advocacy. Like traditional political advocacy, E.I. accounts have particular group orientations. Outgroup-oriented E.I. accounts target an audience that falls outside of the political fold, aiming to increase the visibility of a particular cause, educate and disseminate information, and convince the uninitiated of a project's political worth. Ingroup-oriented E.I. accounts focus on users already amenable to particular ideas and work to educate about a political topic and activate supporters. One content creator who runs a radical political account described her approach, saying

"I wasn't trying to get people to consider themselves anarchists or communists because I realized that that doesn't do much on its own. People have to [use or form] a theory in order to have a strong analysis of the world. I don't think most people who call themselves Communists do a very good job of standing up for communism. So instead of trying to get more and more random people interested in the label 'anarchist' or 'communist', I was trying to get people who already considered themselves somewhere around that to start really interrogating their ideas." (Personal communication, January 13, 2021)

The goal of her account was to educate her followers and provide followers with a more rigorous theoretical basis for their politics. Ingroup-oriented E.I. accounts are not always expressly educational and include propaganda and art accounts as well as activist accounts aimed towards activating a base of support. These accounts, like analogous activist organizations, tend

to have less reach because broad appeal is not the aim. “I’m not very focussed on growing my follower count,” the aforementioned content creator said, “but I do want people to be reading what I’m posting and talking about it and thinking about it” (Personal communication, January 13, 2021). Ingroup-oriented accounts also tend to become more ideologically siloed. These spaces can reflexively attract those interested in a higher degree of ideological purity, while repelling or actively removing dissenting voices. The tendency of radicalization in ingroup-oriented spaces, in contrast to strategies aimed at broad appeal, is not new or unique to Instagram. But such dynamics are important to note in establishing the landscape of discourse possibilities Instagram affords.

Humorous accounts may also be instrumentalized or personal, outgroup or ingroup oriented. With the employment of humor, however, humorous accounts enter into different social relations with users than earnest accounts. Both earnest and humorous accounts resonate with users possessing particular *habitus*. Those amenable to certain styles of online engagement may be resistant to or uninterested in earnest rhetorical strategies on Instagram. “Sometimes I find that the more serious activist pages can be a little too heavy for what I am able to receive at the moment,” said one user (Personal communication, February 25, 2021) illustrating that affective qualities of posts are foundational to their reception. For internet users who are resistant to certain styles of political and activist content, a humorous approach allows for more sustained encounters with political ideas in such a way that better connects with their *habitus* of online interaction, making political information more easily consumable.

While outgroup-oriented humorous instrumentalized accounts still aim for broader topical appeal, this does not necessarily correlate with humor style. One shitpost content creator maintained a high degree of social inaccessibility with a particularized style, but maintained an

outgroup-oriented goal.<sup>6</sup> “I try not to post memes that are actually about theory. Those are usually boring. What people like is, like, nonsensical things about random stuff that incorporate theory but doesn’t state it itself” (Personal communication, May 30, 2021). To a similar point in an Instagram story, they wrote,

“I’m not out there to reach out to people who already have read Deleuze and Marx, I wanna joke about Deleuze and Marx in a way that can be funny to people who haven’t already read them so that they’ll read theory. I don’t give a shit about people who have read theory and they’re not my audience.”  
(Instagram, May 4, 2021)

Humor and subject matter offer a trade-off for humorous accounts; they are two axes of a field of social possibilities. One meme and shitpost page, with over six times the follower base of the account mentioned above, is comparably more ingroup-focused. The aim of her account is “agitating [...] and entertaining those who already get it” (Personal communication, April 29, 2021). The content is directed towards the initiated, but the humor style is more accessible than the former account, allowing for a larger follower base because the habitus required to properly engage in the space, to ‘get’ the content, is less exclusionary.

Non-instrumentalized personal accounts make up a notable proportion of Politigram accounts. These accounts engage in political content but are not guided by a political goal. They engage with political themes with an orientation towards a non-political social goal. These accounts might be personal pages where a user posts and reposts content as a way of processing ideas and expressing opinions, not expressly strategizing to achieve a political outcome. While account admins may have heartfelt political convictions and sincerely express them on their page, the crucial distinction is that patterns of posting lack a guiding concerted political purpose

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<sup>6</sup> Social inaccessibility is relative; at the time of writing, this account had over ten thousands followers, but in contrast to large accessible accounts with hundreds of thousands or millions of followers, the style of humor remains broadly and comparatively less accessible.

that is present in instrumentalized accounts. The accounts are not without purpose; the purpose is personal and social.

Non-instrumentalized humor accounts also do not aim for expressly political ends but deal in political themes. As is the case broadly with humorous accounts, their rhetorical style can rely heavily on irony, and their messages tend to be more implicit than earnest accounts. In these accounts, politics reaches towards the purely social. Political figures, topics, and issues serve as shared signs that are mobilized for humor. Content creators are not particularly interested in the political implications of their posts, nor see their page as a political project. Politics is “more so just for the sake of humor,” a social tool (Personal communication, April 29, 2021). Such users may express a wide range of contradictory political views as part of the comedic style of the account. The ethos of trolling in digital social spaces cannot be overlooked on Politigram, particularly in regards to shitposting. For many content creators and users, humor is the primary drive of engagement in the space. Politics for these accounts is a material from which humor is formed, rather than an important central idea delivered *through* humor. Indeed, many normally apolitical humor accounts occasionally include a post incorporating a political topic *du jour*. Exposure to political topics in this way can still sediment particular political knowledge, establishing norms of how topics are treated. But recognizing the prevalence of non-instrumentalized posts is crucial for understanding what Politigram is and how Instagram users understand and use the space.

Presuming that all content creators on Politigram concertedly aim to further a particular political project would be to misunderstand the variance in ways users encounter political ideas through Instagram. Politigram is a dynamic and messy space where interests come and go and account orientations develop alongside their surroundings. Accounts may incorporate different

styles and intermix the orientations described above. Accounts change in response to their milieu by shifting political outlooks and responding to events. Instagram is a multidimensional tool that different users with different goals mobilize to particular ends. Each strategy must contend with the landscape of knowledge possibilities; the reach and performance of stylistic and rhetorical strategies will succeed or fail according to what flows with or is resisted by the knowledge landscape. Users with particular goals, be it to reach a broad uninitiated audience, to radicalize a susceptible group of users, or to entertain, must contend with the restrictions of the knowledge landscape and tailor their content and interaction with the app accordingly.

### **Commenting and Discussion**

Ratio of comments to likes on Instagram posts is low. Across surveyed accounts, the median ratio of comments to likes of 1%. On earnest posts, comments generally consist of affirmations and users adding relevant information. Argument comment chains of multiple comment replies can occur and see a greater degree of prevalence on larger pages (accounts exceeding one million followers). Trevisan et al. (2019) found accounts of politicians garner a higher proportion of comment reply chains than entertainment-oriented accounts, but across Politigram more broadly, argument chains remain relatively uncommon. A comment on Instagram can consist of up to 2,200 characters, about the length of one page of this thesis, but in practice rarely do they exceed around 30 words. This contrasts a social media site like Reddit, where comments often run long and argument chains form with many voices contributing. This is because a goal of Reddit is to encourage conversation and discussion with respect to a primary submission. Fostering a discussion in the comments is not an aim of Instagram. Comments can only be read on the size of a phone screen, with a width of about eight words. This makes longer

comments difficult to read and violates the ethos of quick consumability. In this way, app organization and cultural norms work in tandem to discourage long comments.

Comments are not a prominent feature of Instagram by design. Comments are hidden away from the main feed and can only be accessed by opening up a new page, interrupting the feed scrolling. Unlike comments on Twitter, which often play as important a role in retweeting and quote-tweeting as the initial tweet, Instagram comments cannot be shared on their own; they are meant only to be auxiliary to a post. The difficulty in accessing comments and a general disinterest in commenting were universally expressed by users I interviewed.

“On Instagram, the way content is shown to you is a little bit different. [...] On Facebook, you’re a lot more likely to be drawn into the comments. Generally on Instagram, although you can go look at comments, the focus is on the content creators you’re looking at. You don’t see the comments on stories. On posts, you have to click to get to them. It feels a little bit less in your face than Facebook.”  
(Personal communication, March 1, 2021)

Users recognize the way that the app nudges them away from comment interactions. This user frequented Facebook groups prior to joining Instagram, but on Instagram is substantially less engaged with comment sections of similar topics. Another common theme expressed by users was a disinterest in direct discussion with other Politigram users. “I can’t say that I’ve ever been in a comment argument with a random person,” one user told me, echoing sentiments from other interviewees that the prospect of arguing with strangers in Instagram comments felt uncomfortable, unsatisfactory, and useless (Personal communication, February 25, 2021; Feb 27, 2021; March 7, 2021). One interviewee who enjoyed sparring online over political issues cited the configuration of comment interaction as the reason he chose *not* to engage with political discourse on Instagram, instead preferring Twitter, which he saw as a more conducive platform for that form of engagement (Personal communication, March 18, 2021). Some posts stand as notable outliers in the trend of low comment activity. On posts about contentious topics, post

volume can dramatically increase and argument chains can form. This shows that impassioned users can be moved to engage with commenting at a higher rate, but a threshold of contention must be crossed.

Instagram structurally and culturally discourages substantive discussion in the comment sections of posts. Through app organization, Instagram places comments out of view, makes them difficult to access, and nudges users to limit themselves to shorter interjections. This configures cultural norms on Instagram where commenting is not a prominent activity for most. This reflexively encourages otherwise vocal users to keep their political discussions on other more conducive social media sites. Norms of commenting work to configure the knowledge environment of Instagram. Posts that deal with topics warranting discussion are structurally discouraged. Liking, a quick and affirmative engagement that does not take users off of their feed, occurs much more frequently than commenting. For all users I interviewed, it was their preferred method of post interaction. Instagram exerts selective pressure against discussion-heavy content. This constitutes a topological feature of Instagram's knowledge landscape. Ideas that are easily sharable, less contentious, and express simpler, pointed concepts are privileged. The kinds of ideas elicited by the knowledge landscape of Instagram are more atomic, faster moving, and resist responsive interaction.

Content creators and users recognize that substantive discussion is impractical within the normal confines of the Instagram app. Some accounts make discord servers for their users to join. One political meme and shitpost account had a discord server of just over 400 users, about 3% the size of his total Instagram follower base. This again illustrates that a relatively small proportion of followers are interested in engaging in political discussions with other Instagram users. Group chats are a common way for accounts of similar topics to communicate and

casually converse. All content creators I spoke with were familiar with group chats, though not all chose to participate in them. One politics and philosophy shitpost account said that they refused to participate in group chats they were invited to join. “They’re, like, young teenagers [who] have this group chat. I don’t want to be part of it because that would be weird. And they’re all like fourteen or fifteen” (Personal communication, May 30, 2021). An activist account admin said that she is in group chats but does not interact with them; they tended to be more social, and she was not interested in that kind of engagement with other accounts. Group chats can grow to considerable size. One political shitpost account described his membership in the Incellelectuals group chats, a large group of both political and nonpolitical shitpost accounts.

“I was in a shitload of group chats because we were just making a ton of group chats with anybody with that [Incellelectuals] profile picture. [...] Discussions would range from people talking about jerking off to politics. There were a few people who were very very academic and and very into explaining philosophical concepts that I was into learning about when I was younger. ” (Personal communication, April 29, 2021)

The use of group chats by this loose community of accounts serves as an example of how they can be used to circumvent the discourse-limiting structure of public-facing Instagram to build community and discuss political or philosophical topics embedded within non-political socialization. Group chats are smaller and more insular than Discord servers, and are exclusive to content creators rather than any interested follower, but the two strategies of communication serve a similar function. They allow interested users to break from the limitations of the knowledge landscape topology. Nevertheless, for the vast majority of users who do not engage in these alternative spaces of discourse, the configurations of the Instagram app and their implication for the possibilities of information flow and knowledge formation remain dominant.



## Insulation

Instagram offers a higher degree of insulation from contentious voices than comparable platforms. Large scale harassment or ‘cancelling’ campaigns that occur on Twitter are not possible on Instagram to the same degree. Even individual disagreements or arguments can be largely avoided on Instagram if a user wishes. This is due to the organization of the app, and is an important aspect of the Instagram user experience as noted by both content creators and users. The structural insulation that Instagram offers constitutes notable topologies on the knowledge landscape.

Instagram differs from a social media site like Twitter in that comments cannot be shared and proliferate across the space in their own right; they are always auxiliary to a post. Moreover, posts can only be shared to a user’s time-limited story; there is no feature that allows for direct permanent sharing like Twitter’s retweeting or quote tweeting, Facebook’s sharing to timeline, or Tumblr’s reblogging. This organization greatly contributes to insulation of users and content creators from large-scale criticism; there is less fear that a particular traceable comment or even post can circulate widely and draw ire from strangers. Users with personal accounts who post to their main feed or to story can be more or less assured that their post will not typically be seen by distant unknown users. The story feature of Instagram even has a ‘close friends’ option that allows users to further tailor who can see their posts. Contrasting his experiences of Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit to Instagram, one user said that, “Posting on Instagram feels a little bit more protected” (Personal communication, March 1, 2021). Instead of making a post to a group of potentially hundreds of thousands of commentators, views are expressed to a smaller, selected audience. “It’s easy to feel like when I’m posting on Instagram, I’m posting to an audience that [I am] familiar with — it just feels more personal,” another user told me (Personal communication,

February 27, 2021b). Other users spoke in similar ways about a certain ease and comfort that comes with posting on Instagram relative to other comparable social media sites. Many characterized posting on Instagram as sharing content to a curated and curatable circle of friends, as opposed to speaking outwards towards the open internet; there was a greater sense of control over how and where the ideas flow.

The ethos of insularity configures the activities of content creators as well. Content creators typically aim to maintain and grow a follower base. Even when not singularly interested in growth, they do desire that their posts be seen and are concerned when their reach diminishes (as in the case of deprioritization, or “shadow banning”<sup>7</sup>). Yet nearly all creators I spoke with described moderating their comments, curating their audience. Comment deletion and account blocking was not reserved for egregious harassment, but most often for reasons of political disagreement. One content creator expressed frustration with ‘tankie’ users commenting on her posts. “I’ll either disprove them and block them later, or just block them immediately. They’re not welcome on my page. All they do is push their nonsense in the comments” (Personal communication, April 29, 2021). Another content creator expressed appreciation for the ability to moderate their own comment section and “delete anything negative,” citing mental health as a motivating factor (Personal communication, May 30, 2021). “Twitter is clearly way more fucking toxic, like orders of magnitude more toxic,” they said. Norms of contention and argumentation on Twitter are a product of the knowledge landscape of Twitter. Instagram discourse spaces lack some of Twitter’s combative tendencies not only because users of Instagram have self sorted onto a platform with others who possess less combative dispositions

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<sup>7</sup> Deprioritization is a process by which Instagram limits the reach of posts from certain accounts by restricting post appearance on followers’ feeds, influencing story ranking, and restricting searches for that account. Instagram acknowledged that certain content can be restricted, diminishing posts’ reach, and that such activity has raised concerns about transparency (Mosseri 2021a)

(though such a function may be at play). It is also because of the active efforts of users and content creators to silo themselves off from criticism, enabled by the structure of the app.

The insulation Instagram provides configures topologies of the knowledge landscape, influencing the circulation of ideas. When an encounter elicits combativeness or negativity, it is easy for users to block or unfollow accounts, maintaining a space of discourse largely free of contention. This lessens the effectiveness of harassment within Politigram compared to many other online political spaces. The expectation that only a curated group of followers might see a post is baked into the user experience of Instagram. Other social media sites have moderation and anti-harassment measures, but Instagram's limited sharing is effective at insulating users from contention because of the difficulty for comments or posts to travel across the space. Combativeness is discouraged structurally by the app design and by users who uphold norms of minimal contention. This effect works in tandem with the structural discouragement of commenting. Posting on Politigram more often takes the form of posting to a select group of followers who will be receptive to the ideas exchanged rather than a field of potential ideological adversaries. The comfort of posting, the insulation from contention Instagram provides, plays into the logics of enjoyment — that Instagram, and Politigram, is foremost a space meant for entertainment and enjoyment.

### **Enjoyment, Information Transformation, and Memeification**

The theme of curating an enjoyable experience was mentioned in all interviews. How enjoyment was found and how users dealt with unenjoyable experiences varied. But each user altered their activity, be it by blocking users, unfollowing pages, or leaving the app for some period of time, when enjoyment waned. For those who were engaged with Politigram, enjoyment

was a substantial motivating force for holding their attention and a principle determining factor for their interaction.

Several users expressed an appreciation for the digestibility of information that Politigram allows for. They were able to stay up to date with news and political events or keep up with certain organizations, activist groups, and writers in one easy-to-use format. Several also expressed that Politigram was a space to encounter political and philosophical concepts they otherwise would not have learned of or looked into. One user who grew up in a small town Conservative area said that he was not presented with diverse political information growing up, but through time spent online and viewing memes he became familiar with Marxism and left-wing politics. “That’s probably a huge part of how I was exposed to more radical ideas and theory, and not just opinions that you can come up with [on your own]” (Personal communication, March 1, 2021). Another user expressed a similar sentiment, saying,

“I’ve struggled with philosophy; I find it too dry and I don’t really find it engaging. My attention just wanders. And I think if someone were to throw a good narrative in front of me, or some really good visual cues in front of me, I would feel more engaged with them.” (Personal communication, February 25, 2021)

Instagram presents configurations of ideas that this user can more easily to digest, whereas a typical academic setting would render these ideas inaccessible. In this way, the presentation of ideas in formats other than the academic article or the political treatise gives an opportunity for the alignment of habitus. As Bourdieu outlines in *Homo Academicus* (1988), power is socially created and perpetuated through norms and structures, not least among them the Academy. Acceptable presentations of knowledge can be exclusionary to those who lack the necessary habitus. ‘Bringing knowledge to the masses’ is not a notion born on Instagram. Nevertheless, those ideas otherwise presented through the academic habitus are rearticulated in a manner that aligns with the habitus of young Instagram users. The tastes and dispositions

accumulated from years spent in online spaces are not resisted on Politigram, but taken as the foundational form through which political ideas are conveyed. The same can be said of political podcasts. One user said, “[podcasts] create this culture where it’s easier for me to consume information. [...] I wouldn’t want to watch CSPAN or something, obviously. I feel like it makes it easier to engage with that kind of content” (Personal communication, February 27, 2021).

Podcasts, YouTube video essays, and Twitch political streams function likewise. Political content that is able to link up with a habitus built for the internet could be interpreted as allowing for a flow of ideas to audiences that would have otherwise found them inaccessible, restricted by the culture and habitus of those in positions of power (scholars, writers, etc.).

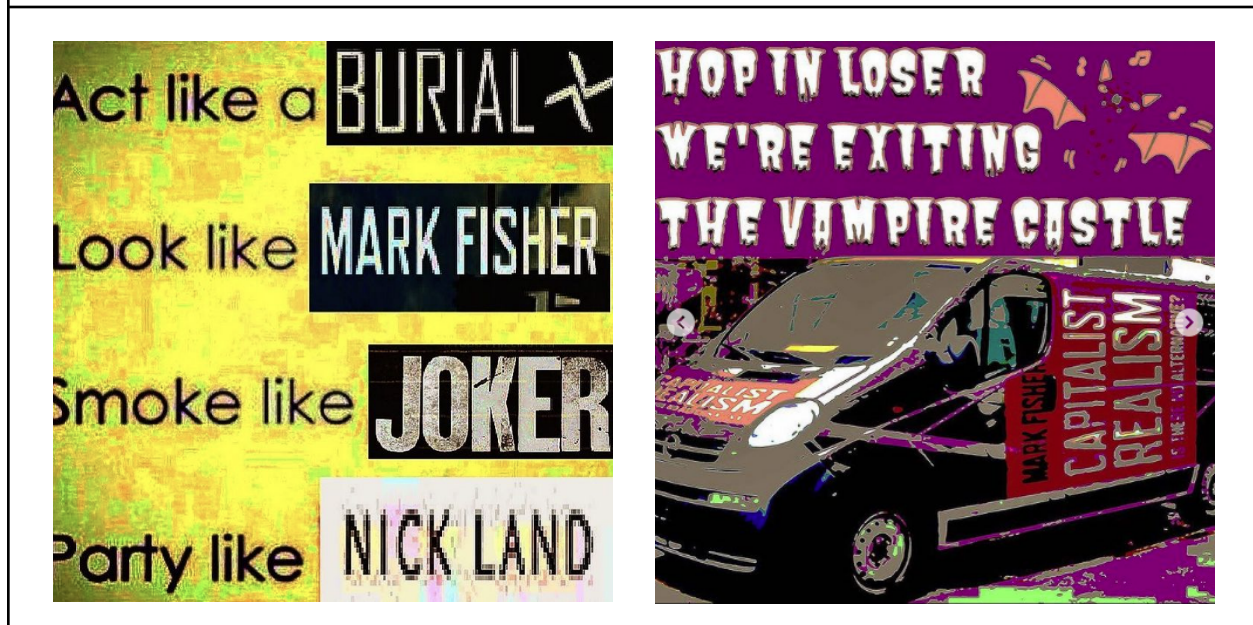
However, analysis should not end with the recognition of the role of habitus. This interpretation carries the assumption that ideas can be conveyed independent of circumstances and media. But the knowledge landscape of Instagram constricts and limits the kinds of ideas that can exist in the space; knowledge is not transferred but built and rebuilt, and concepts are transmitted both through linguistic mediation and affective intensities. Ideas from scholarly and academic spaces, whose forms are elicited in large part by the conventions of habitus, are of a particular configuration, sedimenting form-dependent knowledge. A book configures knowledge sedimentation differently than Instagram encounters. The knowledge landscape constitutes the conditions along which certain ideas take hold and proliferate and others stagnate and flounder. But ideas do not live and die only in their initial forms; they can undergo transformation. One principle way ideas are transformed is through ‘memeification’.

Memeification is a process by which larger, bulkier, and more complex ideas are cut and transformed. It is a process of selection and reproduction with respect to the logics of the knowledge landscape. Ideas most able to proliferate across the knowledge landscape of

Instagram are highly mobile and amenable to combination and recombination with other ideas. Memeification is not a process limited to the production of memes. Rather, it is the process by which ideas are configured to be able to quickly move through digital space, combine, and proliferate, gaining a fitness advantage that long-form complex ideas lack. When a large idea or webs of concepts enters the space of Instagram, governed by the knowledge landscape, it meets resistance. In its initial form, it is unable to move rapidly and proliferate. But memeification cuts out those ideas that are able to proliferate, slicing them away from the corpus of origin. These memeified ideas are better equipped to flourish in the knowledge landscape of Instagram. They are kernels of information, rent away from the corpus of origin, that are small, mobile, and combinatory. They can readily link up with new information, be slotted into other formats with ease, and enter into quick conversation with other ideas at a speed and flexibility that would be impossible for the original idea. The memeified kernel of the idea *can* point back to that corpus of origin, or act as a sign that stands in for the corpus, but in practice it functions as an idea on its own, not just a proxy for the original idea or web of knowledge.

Memeification and its effects can be seen across Politigram. An example of a thinker whose ideas have gained recognition in certain circles of Politigram is Mark Fisher. His writings, essays, and books contain and themselves constitute large ideas and webs of conceptual relations. But these long forms cannot be represented on Instagram; the knowledge landscape resists this. Instead, ideas associated with him and his work, such as hauntology, capitalist realism, and lost futures, are cut out of the original corpus and circulate on Politigram. The memeified ideas function as highly mobile tokens that can be inserted into new locations and juxtaposed against other ideas. They do not merely serve as stand-ins for the original corpus from which they are cut, but circulate on their own and build up new relational lines within the space of Politigram.

Figure 6. Examples of the memeification of writers and ideas.



Users come to know Mark Fisher and his ideas not only *through* the memes that present them, but *as* the memes. Another example among many is the writer Nick Land who has himself, along with his ideas, becomes similarly memeified. Land is not encountered on the terms of his writing, but on the terms of his presentation through memes — Nick Land *is* hyper-racism, Fanged Noumena, technology, accelerationism, cybernetics. These ideas and attributes that enter into circulation on Politigram entirely constitute what Nick Land is in the space.

Memeification is a process that most notably acts upon larger ideas and more complex relational webs through transformation — a making-small, “bite sized” (Personal communication, February 27, 2021). Smaller, already more atomized ideas do not undergo transformation to the same degree because they are not met with the same resistance from the knowledge landscape. They can move quickly and link up across the digital space as they are. A quippy tweet does not need to undergo a substantial reconfiguration to move effectively across Instagram and proliferate. But for an idea such as ‘neoliberalism’, the encounter through books,

journals, or articles and the encounter through Politigram memes build qualitatively different knowledge, shaped through different affects, leading to different relational webs. The former cannot survive on Instagram, or will languish; the latter proliferates and spreads — all according to the logics constituted by the topologies of the knowledge landscape. Posting raw text from a work of political theory tends to perform more poorly on engagement metrics and not move across Politigram as quickly, in contrast to short, mobile, memeified ideas. Infographics or videos, longer form content that might be more equipped to represent a larger idea with a lesser degree of memeifying transformation, also perform more poorly than reposted tweets, simplistic representations of ideas, and punchy slim posts.

This is all not to say that memeified transformations of larger ideas are useless or only ‘worse’ than the ideas of the original corpus. Memeified idea kernels are able to move with great speed and link up quickly with other ideas, come into brief contact, converse, and even accumulate new meaning. The knowledge that is built out on these lines of relations on Politigram is able to escape the exclusivity and restriction of the scholarly habitus. But mistaking encounters with the memeified ideas for encounters with the original corpus is erroneous. Politigram is not simply a vehicle to deliver political or philosophical knowledge using accessible internet content instead of dry literature. Knowledge possibilities are qualitatively transformed when ideas move through the knowledge landscape of Instagram, or of podcasts or video essays. Education over Politigram does not replace education in a university course or at a library; it represents a qualitatively distinct informational encounter.

Several Instagram users I interviewed described that their time spent in political spaces on Instagram influenced their political views. Others, however, pointed to other forms of media as more relevant to their personal political education. “On YouTube, it’s way more [engaging



with] deeper things to chew on in terms of politics. It's way less instant satisfaction," said one respondent (Personal communication, February 27, 2021b). Another said, "I don't feel like I gained that much [in the way of] hard facts from Politigram," instead preferring podcasts as a principle mode of engagement with political ideas (Personal communication, February 27, 2021). For these users, Instagram is not seen as a replacement for more traditional spaces and modes of education. Politigram does not function as a closed space of discourse; different users see more or less value in using Politigram for educational encounters with news and ideas, as influenced by their habitus. Nevertheless, even for those who do not consider Instagram a substantively educational platform, encounters with memeified ideas — be it of police brutality, socialism, activist movements, or world events — build a web of associations, relations, and intensities that come to bear on such concepts, even when they are primarily encountered through other media. Moreover, not every post can be critically assessed, and the use of humor and irony in the humorous wing of Politigram can obfuscate the effects of those memeified encounters. The stakes seem lower when 'it's just a joke', and misrepresentation, distortions of ideas, and half-truths are given more leeway. Those ideas nevertheless can build out webs of relations that constitute knowledge of those concepts.

Some users considered Politigram more of a place to be exposed to ideas, rather than a site of education. One interviewee bought books written by authors whom she had heard about on Politigram (Personal communication, February 27, 2021). Exposing followers to ideas in hopes that they would look elsewhere off of Instagram for more information was at the core of one content creator's posting strategy. "I don't post stuff that is informative," they said, "I post content that people want to read. I'm not posting Marxist theory, but those teenagers that follow me might be like, 'oh I'm going to read that guy. What's his name, Karl Marx?'" (Personal

communication, May 30, 2021). Their aim is not to provide substantive information within their posts, but to spark interests in philosophy and political theory within their follower base. They reported some success with this goal, with several followers sending them pictures of books by Marx or Deleuze that they had purchased after learning about them through their shitposting page. Because this habit of interaction is not evident in the digital trace data on Instagram, it is not clear how common outside reading and research on the ideas encountered on Politigram is. Such activity is likely rare in proportion to the total follower base. In any case, this interaction is only auxiliary to Politigram, not elicited by it. The course an idea takes as it proliferates across Politigram is largely unaffected by how familiar an individual user is with the original corpus the idea came from. Liking, sharing, or even making a Communism meme, for instance, does not require a user to have read Marx or have a substantive understanding of the subject matter. It only requires that they be familiar with the idea as it is used *on* Instagram. Reading scholarly literature does not diminish a user's ability to participate in the proliferation of ideas per se. But it is incidental, not selected for by the knowledge landscape. It is impossible to investigate the counterfactual of if a given user would or would not have encountered a given idea had they not been on Politigram, but it is clear that it is not the knowledge landscape — the structure of the app and the cultural norms of the space — that forces users towards outside research and continued reading. Those with an existing propensity towards inquiry into political literature may indeed encounter new names and ideas on Politigram, spurring them to outside investigation. But there is nothing about Politigram itself that spurs followers towards more substantive engagement with political knowledge. It is likely that for many, the memeified kernels of ideas remain just that.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, I have explored the structures of the Instagram app, its social fields, and norms that regulate activity. They produce topologies that direct and interrupt flows, eliciting particular interactions and establishing a set of knowledge possibilities. The landscape of possibilities helps to explain how some ideas proliferate across the space of Politigram while others stagnate. The app's design gives rise to crucial topologies; Instagram is encountered as an app on a phone, and all that can be seen on Instagram is confined to a handheld screen. Users encounter ideas through posts and stories with variable timescales that elicit certain usage patterns. Posts are seen one at a time, making encounters singular and inscribed within a moment, eliciting rapid content consumption. These design features raise topologies on the knowledge landscape, selecting for ideas that withstand these patterns of consumption. Through encounters with these selected ideas, particular knowledge is sedimented.

Examining the practice of commenting reveals further topologies. Comments are made auxiliary to posts by the app's design, contrasting platforms like Facebook, Reddit, or Twitter. Interaction through comments are structurally deprioritized. A broadcasting ethos, rather than one of debate and discussion, dominates and selects for compatible posts, audiences, and encounters. Users and content creators are nudged away from discursive developments and knowledge horizons are narrowly enclosed around users and communities. Social insulation, configured by and configuring the knowledge landscape, arises on Politigram. With an enjoyment ethos pervasive and discussion deprioritized, users and content creators alike are insulated from contention. This insulation, made possible by the structure of the platform, is valued and actively maintained by users.

Upon encountering topologies of the knowledge landscape, certain ideas are met with resistance while others are able to proliferate. Processes take place in response to the selective pressures of the knowledge landscape which restrict, cut, and transform ideas. The process of memeification extracts conceptual kernels from complex ideas that run aground against the topologies. Memeified ideas can then travel quickly, link up with other ideas, and proliferate. Such processes transform and configure ideas, influencing what kinds of ideas can be encountered and what knowledge is sedimented. These processes only take place because of the particular topologies of the knowledge landscape; different topologies would configure different processes.

Thinking with the knowledge landscape and examining its topologies allows for a more robust consideration of activity in online spaces. It is more resistant to the capricious tempest of internet culture. Internet trends, memes, and movements will come and go. Over the course of writing this paper, Biden ascended the presidency, conflict between Israel and Palestine reignited, protests in Cuba erupted, and countless memes rose and fell. Analysis of digital spaces that is too contingent upon trends will miss the forest for the trees, as many digital ethnographies do. On June 30, 2021, Adam Mosseri signalled that Instagram would move to prioritize video content over images on the app to compete with TikTok (Mosseri 2021b). Such changes would certainly have ramifications for phenomena like Politigram. But thinking with the knowledge landscape means analysis does not become unmoored by such developments. Rather, we are able to think with change and consider how new social or structural features will direct flows differently across the landscape, restricting old possibilities and configuring new ones.

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## Appendix A

Figure 7.

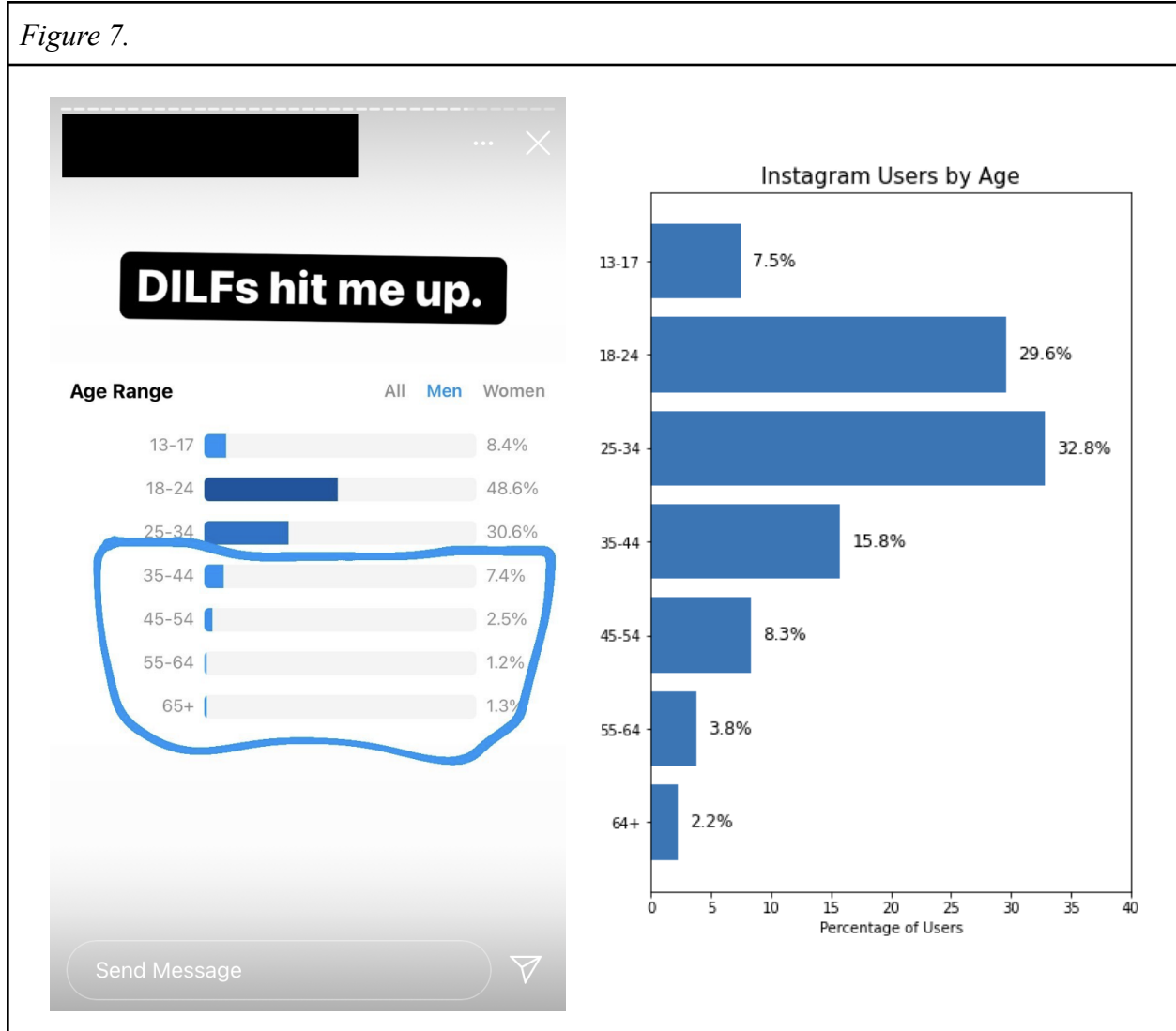


Figure 7 shows one meme page content creator's follower demographics by age. The account name has been removed to maintain anonymity. Age demographic data for Politigram is sparse as it is not public information users can access. This user posted their demographics to their public story. The follower demographics of this account skew younger than Instagram overall (Kemp 2021). Conclusions about the entire network of Politigram cannot be drawn from this single account, but this does lend credence to the idea that Politigram is primarily a space used by younger Instagram users.

## Appendix B

Figure 8.

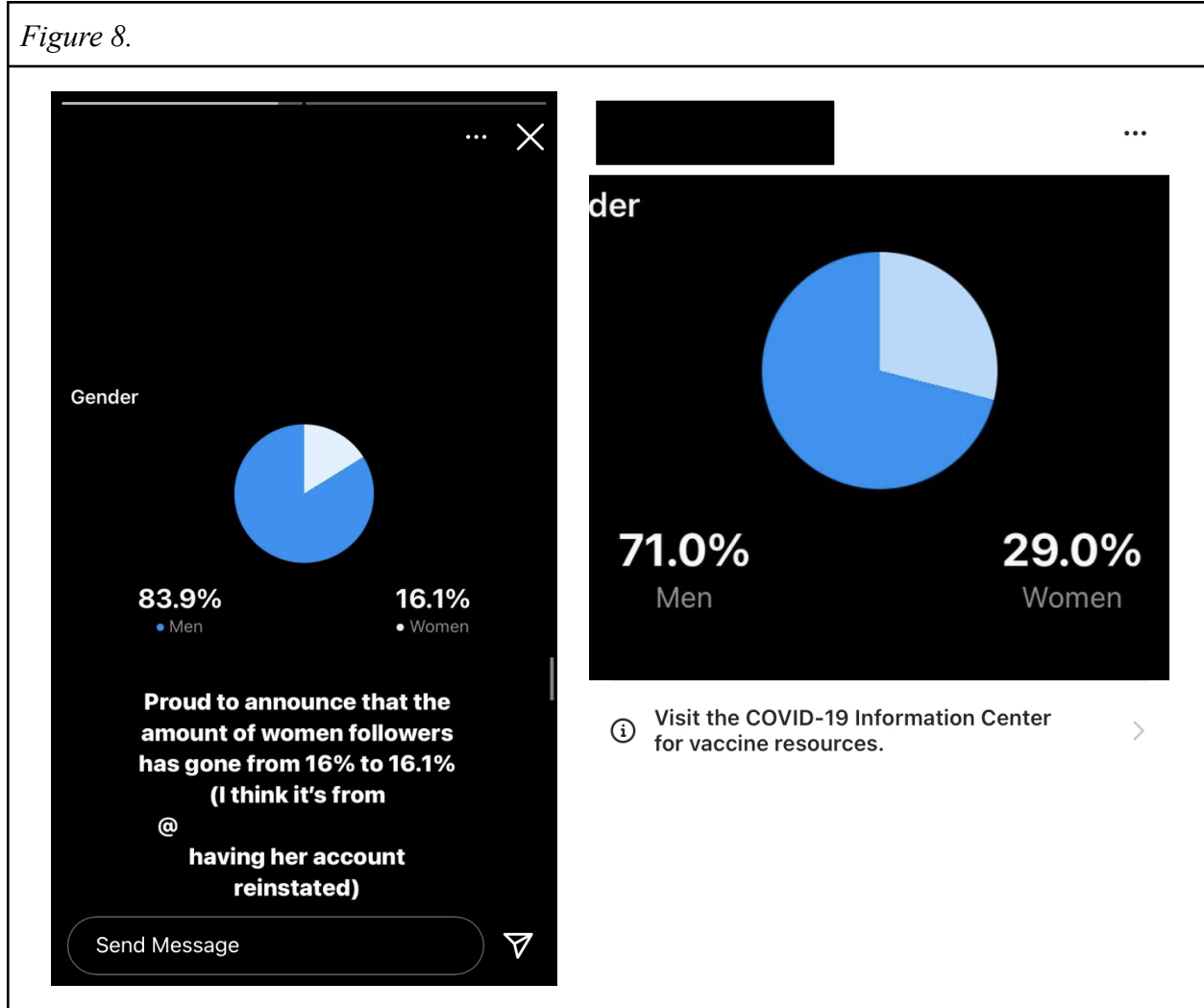


Figure 8 shows two meme accounts that posted the gender demographics of their followers. Account names have been removed to maintain the anonymity of the accounts. Like age demographics, this information is not publicly available to followers, but the examples given here were posted by two public Politigram meme accounts. These age demographics skew significantly more towards men in comparison to Instagram's overall gender demographics, which are 51.4% women, and the demographics of Politigram's core 18-24 age range, 52.5% men (Kemp 2021).

These are only two examples, and are both meme accounts, so conclusions from these data alone cannot be drawn about all of Politigram. If more robust data on the gender demographics of Politigram were available, it may be fruitful to consider the role of gendered norms in the space with regards to patterns of engagement. Such analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.



## Appendix C

Figure 9.

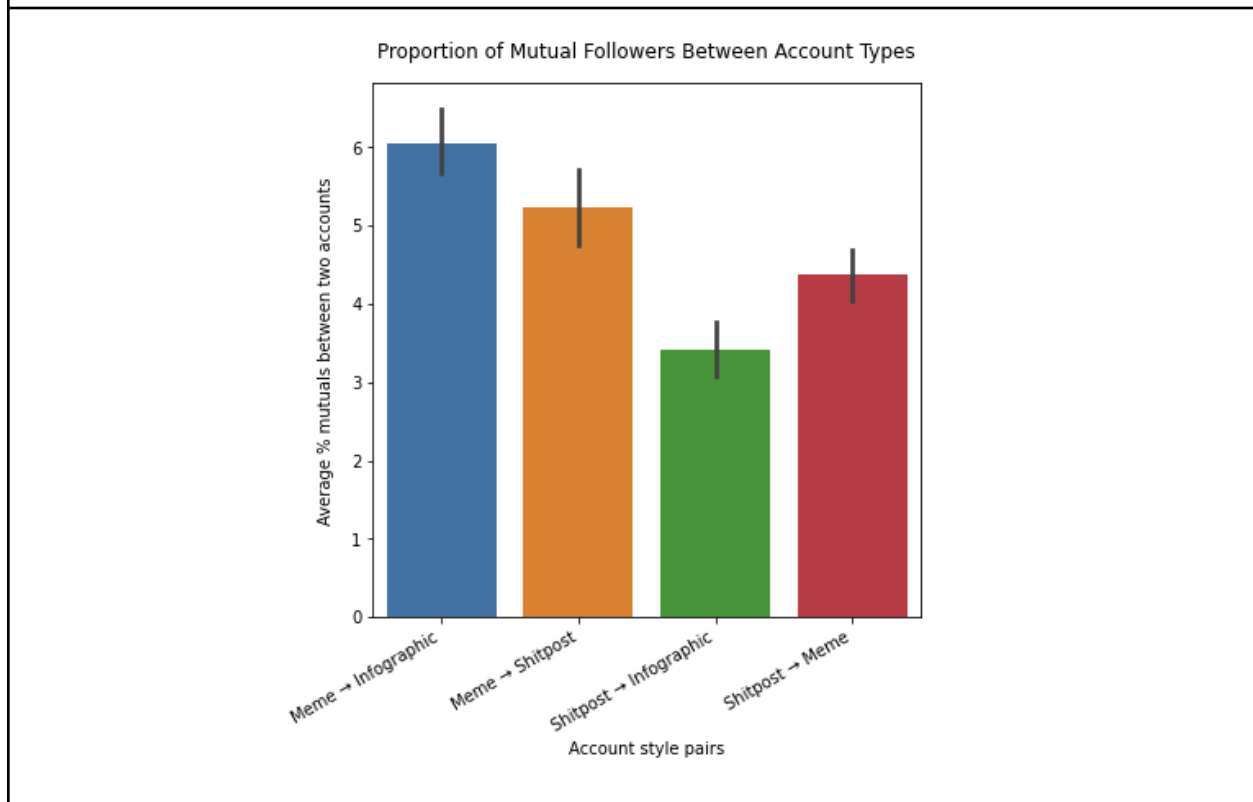


Figure 9 illustrates the directional differentiation in following patterns between account types. While an average 6.1% of the followers of a sampled meme-posting account followed a sampled infographic account, only an average 5.2% followed a given shitpost account. Though the trend is suggested by the data, it did not meet the 95% confidence interval test using the bootstrap sampling method described on page 20. More follower relevant follower data could help to narrow the variance and more confidently establish a trend.

The directional following pattern is reversed for shitposting accounts: an average 3.4% of the followers of a sampled shitpost account followed a sampled infographic account, while an average 4.4% followed a sampled meme-posting account. This result did represent a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ). This pattern also reveals that followers of shitpost accounts are more discriminatory in favor of following humorous accounts over earnest accounts. Choosiness is less pronounced among followers of meme accounts.

## Appendix D

Figure 10.

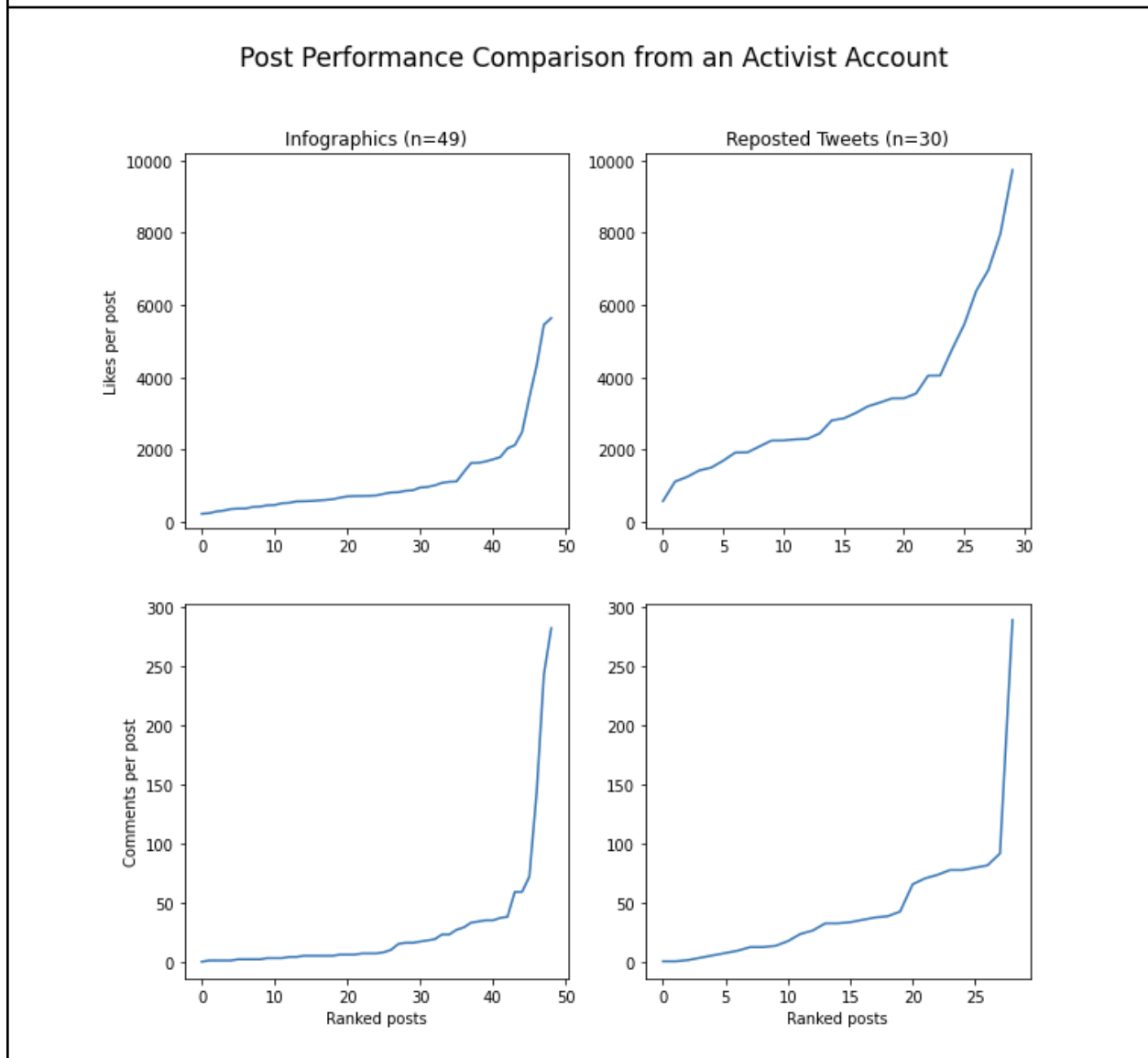


Figure 10 shows a comparison between post style engagement performance, taken from a sample of 109 posts between Feb. 1, 2021 – June 14, 2021 from one popular activist account. This account displayed a high rate of posting both infographics and tweets, and so is a good candidate to examine the relative success of different posting styles. Using the same bootstrap sampling method described on page 20, I found that the mean number of likes on reposted tweets was significantly higher than on infographics for this account ( $p < 0.05$ ). Though the mean number of comments per post was also found to be higher for tweet reposts, the difference was not statistically significant enough to determine with confidence that this is the case ( $p > 0.05$ ).